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THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

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CHAPTER IV

Ahasuerus' identity with Artaxerxes II, Mnemon—Plutarch's Life of Artaxerxes—Plutarch's sources and their reliability—Artaxerxes' character—His relations to the Greeks—The Peace of Antalcidas—The rebellion of Cyrus the Younger—The date of the battle of Cunaxa—Artaxerxes' celebration of his victory—His domestic life—Quarrels between his queen and his mother—The rule of the harem—The queen's disobedience—Her degradation and murder—Her name—Artaxerxes' concubines—Artaxerxes' suspicions against his grandees—His palace at Susa—The name Ahasuerus in the Hebrew version—A comparison between Xerxes and Artaxerxes II—The resurrection of the Persian empire—The Arsacides alleged descendants of Artaxerxes II—His proper name—The uniformity of the Scriptures—The name Artaxerxes in the Greek version.

THE veracity of a story has to be judged by the facts narrated therein, and these facts on their own merits, independently of the names of the *dramatis personae*, which may have been changed for some reason. The modern exegetes of the Book of Esther evidently do not grant these premisses. Having identified Ahasuerus with Xerxes, an identification that etymologically cannot be doubted, and finding that historically the events of this Book could not have occurred under the reign of the latter, they conclude that the story is fictitious. This conclusion is erroneous. We readily concede that an assumption that these events actually happened under Xerxes' reign is beyond the limits of consideration, as we have shown in the preceding chapter. But this fact does not prove that these events are unhistorical. They might have occurred under a ruler whose name was not Ahasuerus. We indeed

contend that the events of our story, being corroborated by external, non-biblical historical sources, cannot be denied, and that the *name* of the king found in the present Hebrew version of the Book of Esther is fictitious. In the course of our investigation, we hope to prove the truth of our contention.

Historical events under the reign of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404/3–359/8 B.C.E.) leave no room for doubt that the events narrated in our story occurred under that king's reign. The latter having played a part in the history of Greece, such as no other Persian king before or after him, we have abundant information about his political affairs, which can be traced in our story. But records about his domestic life, written by various Greek authors, are scanty and not of a character to be implicitly relied upon, being apparently a mixture of truth and fiction. The writings of the older classical historians who dealt with this subject, like Ctesias of Cnidus, Deinon of Colophon, Heraclides of Cyme, and others are lost, with the exception of some fragments of Ctesias.¹ All later historians who touched upon this subject drew from these sources. Plutarch, in his *Life of Artaxerxes*, relied for the description of the first part of this king's reign chiefly upon Ctesias, for that of the later years chiefly upon Deinon, but drew also from Heraclides and other sources. Ctesias could testify as an eye-witness to the events that happened in the first six years of Artaxerxes' reign, since he was physician at the Persian court for about seventeen years (414–398). He wrote his history about 390. His testimony ought seemingly to be regarded of prominent value.

¹ For the historical sources for this period see Ed. Meyer, *Gesch.* III, pp. 7 ff.

But Plutarch does not place much confidence in him, charging that he had filled his books with a number of extravagant and incredible fables. Ctesias had indeed in antiquity the not undeserved reputation of a liar and forger. Deinon wrote his history towards the end of the Achaemenian period, and is generally regarded as trustworthy. For our present investigation, we must chiefly rely upon Plutarch. But judging by his *Artaxerxes*, we must doubt Deinon's reliability. We shall demonstrate by a few striking examples that this historian does not deserve great confidence. It is surprising to see our modern historians, like Ferdinand Justi,² and even Eduard Meyer, the greatest authority on ancient history in our times, implicitly accepting in their Histories many statements of Plutarch, without subjecting them to a critical analysis. We call attention to the following points:

(1) According to Plutarch, Artaxerxes II reached the age of ninety-four years.³ Both Justi⁴ and Eduard Meyer⁵ accept this statement. If this be true, Artaxerxes must have been forty-eight at the time of his accession to the throne, since he reigned from 404/3 to 359/8. But the latter was the son of Darius II and Parysatis. They had, according to Plutarch,⁶ four children, of whom Artaxerxes was the eldest, Cyrus the second, and Ostanes and Oxatres the two youngest. Darius reigned 424-404. As Cyrus claimed the throne on account of having been born in the purple, he must have been about nineteen years old at the

² *Geschichte des Alten Persiens*, Berlin, 1879 (in Oncken's 'Allgemeine Geschichte', part IV).

³ Plutarch's *Artaxerxes*, XXX, 9.

⁴ In his *Geschichte*, p. 136.

⁵ In his *Forschungen*, p. 499. In his *Geschichte* he says that Artaxerxes was *uralt*.

⁶ *Artaxerxes*, I, 2.

demise of his father. Accordingly Artaxerxes would have been twenty-nine years older than his second brother. Parysatis, remarkable for her cruelty, would have been more remarkable as a natural phenomenon, having borne three lusty sons after an intermission of twenty-nine years.⁷ As a matter of fact, Artaxerxes was merely a few years older than his second brother. He must have been at the prime of his life at the time of his campaign against the Cadusians, about twenty-four years after his accession, if he could bear all the hardships of the march like the meanest soldier and show strength and alacrity by marching two hundred furlongs daily, as Plutarch informs us.⁸ However, Plutarch is in this case not as much to blame as the modern historians; for the former gives Artaxerxes a reign of sixty-two years,⁹ and thus Cyrus would have been only about thirteen years younger than his eldest brother. If historians rightly reject the statement concerning the years of his reign as unhistorical, they ought to have repudiated also that as to Artaxerxes' age!

(2) Plutarch's date of Artaxerxes' reign, mentioned above, is not a scribal error, as the same date is given by Sulpicius Severus, and both drew from the same source, from Deinon, according to Ed. Meyer.¹⁰ The latter

⁷ There is also another chronological improbability. Artaxerxes I, who was the younger son of Xerxes, was undoubtedly born in the purple. As the latter ascended the throne 484, and was murdered 465, Artaxerxes could hardly have been more than eighteen at the time of his accession. Now if Artaxerxes II was forty-eight years old when he became king, he must have been born 452. Then Artaxerxes I would have become a grandfather at the age of thirty. G. Rawlinson (*Herod.* IV, p. 2) considers it incredible that Xerxes should have had a grown-up son when he was at most thirty-six years old.

⁸ *Artaxerxes*, XXIV, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.* XXX, 9.

¹⁰ *Forschungen*, p. 489.

admits that he is unable to explain how such an error could have occurred. He evidently overlooked the fact that this date, giving Artaxerxes the age of ninety-four years at his death, is the basis of all the stories about Cyrus and Parysatis, told by Plutarch. It is also possible to explain the occurrence of this error. Eusebius gives Artaxerxes II a reign of forty years, while Africanus gives Artaxerxes III a reign of twenty-two years. Hence it is very possible that the date given by Plutarch and Severus include the regnal years of both these kings. This date sufficiently shows how badly Deinon must have been informed about the Persian history of this period.

(3) Plutarch tells us that Cyrus had a concubine named Aspasia, who had been taken prisoner in the battle of Cunaxa, and afterwards became the concubine of Artaxerxes. But his oldest son Darius, after having been appointed successor, requested his father to give Aspasia to him. Artaxerxes complied with his request, but soon afterwards he took her away and made her priestess of Diana of Ecbatana, whom they called Anaitis, that she might pass the remainder of her life in chastity.¹¹ Darius, incensed and persuaded by Teribazus, conspired against the life of his father and intended to assassinate him in his bed-chamber.¹² When these events occurred, Artaxerxes was

¹¹ *Artaxerxes*, XXVII, 4.

¹² *Ibid.* XXIX. Plutarch may congratulate himself that he was not a Jewish author. The commentators on Esther concern themselves with the difficult question how Esther, who as cousin of Mordecai must have been at least fifty or sixty years of age, should have been so beautiful as to captivate the heart of Xerxes. Plutarch's tale is more incredible, and nevertheless Justi, *Gesch.*, p. 137, accepts it literally, without expressing any doubt as to its historicity. Some commentators believe that in the seclusion and care of an Oriental harem beauty lasts to an extreme age (see Bertheau-Ryssel, p. 400, and Paton, p. 170). However, just the

already far advanced in years, as Plutarch asserts. The fact that a successor to the throne was appointed shows that they happened in the last years of his reign. At that time Aspasia was already an old woman, at the age of seventy at least, according to Plutarch's chronology. Accordingly, 'the goddess of beauty' could not have 'contributed her share towards persuading Darius by putting him in mind of the loss of Aspasia'.

(4) Plutarch further tells us that Parysatis was instrumental in bringing about the marriage of Artaxerxes to his own daughter Atossa, by telling him to make her his wife, without regarding the laws and opinions of the Greeks.¹³ This daughter was apparently rather young at the time of her marriage to her own father, since her brother Ochus, the youngest son of Artaxerxes, is said to have promised her to make her his queen, in case she would assist him in putting his elder brothers out of the way.¹⁴ This occurred at the time of Darius's conspiracy. But according to Plutarch, Parysatis must have been fifty years of age at least, when Artaxerxes ascended the throne, and could hardly have been alive towards the end of his reign.

Historians attach too much importance to Persian harem-stories recorded by Greek authors. We ought to bear in mind that the Persian harem was more closely guarded than the Golden Fleece. No outsider could know

contrary is true. Justi, *l. c.*, p. 125, observes: 'The charms of the women last seldom more than eight or nine years. The splendid beauty soon turns withered, lean, blear-eyed, and becomes in every respect an ugly woman. Each year brings a new wrinkle, until the former light of the harem is quite obscured'. From this point of view, we understand why there were new gatherings of virgins from time to time.

¹³ *Artaxerxes*, XXIII, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* XXVI, 3.

exactly the real happenings there.¹⁵ The stories are based upon rumours which may have been embellished and distorted, not upon first-hand information. It should also be taken into account that the Greek writers in telling startling stories about the barbarians, were playing to the gallery. The Greek physicians at the Persian court were most likely better informed about happenings in the harem. But with the exception of Ctesias, who is fond of giving fiction instead of truth, especially where his own ambition was concerned, these physicians did not write histories.

There is no doubt some truth in many stories of Plutarch's *Artaxerxes*, but it is mixed with fiction. There may have been a conspiracy against the life of Artaxerxes in the first years of his reign, in which Aspasia played some part. Who knows whether she was not involved in some conspiracy to avenge the death of her lover Cyrus, which the Greek author mixed up with the conspiracy of Darius that occurred about forty years later? Ed. Meyer, who in his *History* gave full credence to Plutarch's account, seems to have lost faith in it, as his description of the events under discussion, in the *Encyclop. Brit.* (11th Edition), differs in several points from that of Plutarch. He writes: 'In the last years of his reign, he had sunk into a perfect dotage. All his time was spent in the harem, the intrigues of which were complicated by marrying his own daughter Atossa. At the same time his sons were quarrelling about his succession. One of them, Ochus, induced his father to condemn to death three of his elder brothers who stood in his way. Shortly afterwards Artaxerxes died.' This

¹⁵ It is different with Jewish writers, as some of them were in all probability eunuchs (see Chapter VII), and therefore were better acquainted with the secrets of the harem than the average Persians.

historian evidently does not believe in Plutarch's stories, that Darius was found guilty of a conspiracy, that the second brother, Ariaspes, committed suicide, and that the third brother was murdered by Harpates at the order of Ochus.¹⁶ We must indeed take these stories with a grain of salt, not as did Justi who in his *History* adheres faithfully to Plutarch's description in all its details.

It is noteworthy that there is a period of about thirty years at least between the death of the first queen of Artaxerxes and the alleged marriage to his own daughter Atossa. Who was queen in the meantime? If there had been a queen, she would in all probability have taken part in the intrigues at the court, as did all the Persian queens, and Greek writers would have told us something about her. There seems to have been a queen who differed from all her predecessors, in not mixing herself in the intrigues of the court, and, therefore, Greek writers did not know anything about her. Now it is true, Plutarch states: 'Some historians, amongst whom is Heraclides of Cyme, affirm that Artaxerxes married not only Atossa, but also another of his daughters Amestris.'¹⁷ However, the latter marriage could only have preceded that to Atossa by a few years; for Plutarch tells us that Amestris had been promised to Teribazus, but Artaxerxes, instead of keeping his promise, married her himself, promising Teribazus that he should have his youngest daughter Atossa, of whom, however, he also became enamoured and whom he married.¹⁸ Moreover, Plutarch's statement that Artaxerxes married his own daughters, though generally accepted by all historians,

¹⁶ *Artaxerxes*, XXX, 2-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* XXIII, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* XXVII, 7-9.

is rather doubtful.¹⁹ We have no similar record of any other Persian king of the Achaemenians, Arsacids and Sassanids. Artaxerxes may have had a queen whose name by some was said to be Atossa, by others, Amestris. But the Greek writers, knowing that the Zoroastrian religion considers next-of-kin marriage sacrosanct, and being led astray by the queen's names, identical with those of his daughters, believed that he married the latter.²⁰

Ed. Meyer describes Artaxerxes II as being a good-natured monarch, but weak, capricious, readily accessible to personal influences and dependent upon his favourites; in his time the baleful influence of the harem made appalling progress.²¹ The character of Ahasuerus, as represented in the Book of Esther, could not be more accurately depicted than by this description. However, notwithstanding his character, Artaxerxes II was, without exception, the greatest monarch of the Achaemenian dynasty. It is true he does not deserve any credit for his power. His greatness was due neither to his own personality nor to the strength of the Persian empire, which on the contrary showed in all parts under his reign

¹⁹ Cf., however, Ed. Meyer, *Gesch.*, Einleitung, 1910, pp. 23-32, and III, p. 41. He accepts this statement on Plutarch's authority. The latter tells us in connexion with Artaxerxes' marriage to his own daughter: 'his affection for Atossa was so strong, that though she had a leprosy which spread itself over her body, he was not disgusted at it'. This statement is not in accord with that of Herodotus, I, 139, who writes: 'If a Persian has the leprosy, he is not allowed to enter into a city or to have any dealings with the other Persians.'

²⁰ It is rather curious that the names of Artaxerxes' queen *Hadassah* and *Esther* should be almost identical with those of his two daughters, *Atossa* and *Amestris*, he is said to have married.

²¹ See his article 'Artaxerxes', in the *Encyclop. Brit.*, 11th ed., and *Geschichte*, V, p. 181.

visible signs of decline and decay, but to the discord and corruption of the Greeks. Still the Persians must have looked upon him with the greatest admiration for having vindicated their honour. Since the days of Marathon and the humiliating defeats at Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale, the Persians, this proud nation which considered itself to be greatly superior in all respects to the rest of mankind,²² could not help admitting the superiority of the Greeks, by whom they had been disgracefully defeated. Ed. Meyer observes: 'In many Persians may have been alive the feeling of disgrace that the great campaign had ended so deplorably, that they were even unable to come to the assistance of the brave garrisons in Thrace.'²³ Both Artaxerxes I, who was compelled to recognize the independence of the Greeks of Asia Minor, and Darius II were only too glad when the Greeks did not interfere in their own dominion.²⁴ But under the rule of Artaxerxes II, the Persians could lift up their heads again and look down with contempt upon their former arch-enemies, the Greeks. What a spectacle it must have been for the Persians to see the descendants of the heroes of many glorious battles crouching at the feet of their king and paying him divine honours!²⁵ The aim for which Darius I and his successor Xerxes had striven in vain, the subjection of the Greeks, was actually attained by Artaxerxes II. Greece was subdued, and officially recognized Persia's suzerainty. There is no doubt that this king's memory was held by the Persians in the greatest esteem and reverence even in

²² Herodotus I, 134.

²³ *Geschichte*, III, p. 585.

²⁴ Egypt would never have succeeded in freeing itself from Persia without the aid of the Greeks.

²⁵ *Artaxerxes*, XXII, 8.

later times. Diodorus Siculus informs us why Ochus, the successor of Artaxerxes II, assumed the name Artaxerxes: 'Artaxerxes, ruling the kingdom with great justice and integrity, and being a great lover and earnest promoter of peace, the Persians decreed that all succeeding kings should be called by his name.'²⁶ Such an unhistorical and ridiculous legend must have come from an oriental source at a time when Persian history was no longer known, but the memory of Artaxerxes II was still alive. We consider it hardly a coincidence that the founder of the Neo-Persian empire bore the name of Artaxerxes (Ardashir, Artashatr).²⁷

Artaxerxes II was, like Darius I, incontestably king of Asia. The extent of his empire is defined in the Book of Esther by the geographical term: 'from India unto Ethiopia' (מהורו ועד כוש).²⁸ At the outset of his reign, he was fortunate in recovering many Greek cities of Asia Minor lost about eighty years before his reign by his great-grandfather Xerxes. The fall of Athens (402 B.C.E.) ended its hegemony over these cities, and they became an easy prey to the Persian empire. Sparta's plan to continue Athen's policy and to establish a new hegemony, was frustrated by the corruption of Greece. Plutarch states that Artaxerxes forced Agesilaus, who was victorious everywhere, to leave Asia Minor by sending Hermocrates into Greece with a great amount of gold, and instructed him to corrupt with it the leading men in the Greek states and to stir up a Grecian war against Sparta. The most important

Esther
I. 1; 8.9

²⁶ In his *Historical Library*, XV, 2.

²⁷ See Justi, *Geschichte*, p. 177.

²⁸ There may be some doubt whether such a geographical term includes Egypt. The latter country was no longer under the Persian rule at the period of our story. But we may reasonably assume that its independence was never recognized by the Persian kings (cf. Chapter I, n. 5).

cities formed a league against it. Artaxerxes deprived Sparta also of the dominion of the sea through the agency of the Athenian Conon who acted in conjunction with the Persian satrap Pharnabazus. After he had won the battle of Cnidus, he drew almost the whole of Greece into his interest. The Peace of Antalcidas (387 B.C.E.) was entirely of his own making. Sparta, at the advice of Antalcidas, gave up to the Persian king '*all the Greek cities of Asia Minor, and the islands which are reckoned among its dependencies, to be held as tributaries*', as stipulated by this Peace.²⁹ It is noteworthy that both Plutarch and the author of the Book of Esther, in describing the signal success of Artaxerxes II, use exactly the same expression.

Esther
10. 1.

The passage: 'And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land and the isles of the sea', undoubtedly refers to the Greek part of Asia Minor and the islands which became tributary to this king, by virtue of the Peace of Antalcidas. It was concluded five years after the events narrated in our story. Our author does not say that Ahasuerus came into the possession of these territories by means of conquest. He was an historian, and knew that they were not acquired by force of arms but by diplomacy. Being well acquainted with the historical events of that period, he was justified in saying: 'And all the acts of his power and of his might . . . are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?' These high terms of praise were well merited, and justly applied to the political achievements of this king. Artaxerxes II was indeed, from the Persian point of view, as Diodorus said, an earnest promoter and great lover of peace. By his famous 'Royal Peace', he freed his empire from its

Esther
10. 2.

²⁹ *Artaxerxes*, XX, XXI, 6.

hereditary enemies, gained valuable possessions, and deprived Greece of its independence, so that the Greeks themselves had hardly anything left worth fighting for. But from a Greek point of view the Greek was right who exclaimed: 'Alas for Greece, when the Lacedaemonians are turning Persians!' ³⁰

Darius II died in the spring of 404 B.C.E. He had appointed his eldest son Artaxerxes as his successor. This appointment was not in accord with the precedent of Darius I, who had appointed his younger son Xerxes as his successor, because he was born in the purple. According to this precedent, Cyrus, the second son of Darius II, had a better claim to the throne, having been born after the latter had become king.³¹ It was also well known that Parysatis, the all-powerful queen, the mother of both Artaxerxes and Cyrus, was strongly in favour of her younger son. Hence Artaxerxes II, at the beginning of his reign, did not feel himself secure in the possession of the throne. He may have well remembered how Xerxes II, after a reign of forty-five days, had been murdered by his brother Sogdianus, and the latter in his turn, after several months, at the order of his own father Darius II. Thus fratricide was not unusual among the members of his dynasty. Cyrus, indeed, at the accession of his brother, on the occasion of his consecration at Pasargadae, designed to murder him. This design was frustrated by Tissaphernes. The tears and entreaties of his mother prevailed with Artaxerxes to pardon his brother for this crime, and he sent him back to Lydia.³² Soon after, despising his brother for his weakness for having let such a dangerous enemy escape, Cyrus again began to conspire against

³⁰ *Ibid.* XXII, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.* II, 4-5.

³² *Ibid.* III.

him. Artaxerxes was well aware of his designs, being warned of all his movements by Tissaphernes. But Parysatis made it her business to remove the king's suspicions.³³ Meanwhile Cyrus gathered a large army, and also wrote to the Lacedaemonians for assistance, making them great promises in case he should achieve his aim. In this letter he spoke in very high terms of himself, telling them that he had a greater and more princely heart than his brother ; that he was the better philosopher, being instructed in the doctrines of the Magi,³⁴ and that he could drink more wine and carry it better (*οἶνον πίνειν πλείονα καὶ φέρειν*) than his brother.³⁵ This characterization of Artaxerxes II by his brother Cyrus is of the highest importance for the interpretation of the Book of Esther. Artaxerxes was indeed a weak character. He was not a good Zoroastrian, for under his reign the Zoroastrian religion was completely corrupted.³⁶ Finally, under the influence of wine, he was losing his senses.³⁷

Having made all preparations for carrying out his designs, Cyrus began his march against the king with a numerous army, among which were about thirteen thousand Greek mercenaries. He found one pretence after another for having such an armament on foot ; but his real designs did not remain long undiscovered. For Tissaphernes went in person to inform the king of them.³⁸ Therefore on the march Cyrus openly declared his intentions to overthrow his brother and to seize the crown.

³³ *Artaxerxes*, IV, 3.

³⁴ Cyrus evidently meant to imply to the Greeks that the Magi would willingly assist him in his enterprise.

³⁵ *Artaxerxes*, VI, 3-4.

³⁶ See Chapter VI.

³⁷ See Chapter VIII.

³⁸ *Artaxerxes*, VI, 6.

This rebellion came to an end at the battle of Cunaxa in which his army was defeated and Cyrus lost his life. This battle occurred in October 404. Now it is well known that the Babylonian chronology is a year behind that of the Greeks and Egyptians. The latter had the system of *ante-dating*, that is to say, the year in which a king died is reckoned as the first year of the succeeding king, and with the civil New Year begins the second year of his reign. Accordingly Artaxerxes II, having ascended the throne in the year 404, the Greek chronology places the battle of Cunaxa in the fourth year of his reign. The Babylonians, however, had the system of *post-dating*, the year in which a king ascends the throne is given to his predecessor, while the first year of his own reign begins with the first of Nisan, on the New Year festival, in which the king had to seize the hand of Bēl-Marduk, in order to be recognized as legitimate king.³⁹ The Book of Esther was undoubtedly written in Babylonia, and according to Babylonian chronology, the year 404 in which Artaxerxes ascended the throne was reckoned to his predecessor Darius II, and his own reign began 403. Therefore the battle of Cunaxa occurred two years and a half after his accession to the throne.

Cyrus being dead, Artaxerxes II was at length firmly established on his throne. He could now in perfect security celebrate the long delayed coronation festivities, and at the same time the victory over his enemy. It was done in a magnificent fashion, befitting the rank of the Great King, and the signal occasion; he had saved his life and his throne. The description of these festivities is therefore by no means exaggerated, as all modern commentators

Esther
1. 2-9.

³⁹ Cf. Ed. Meyer, *Forschungen*, pp. 437-502.

contend.⁴⁰ This celebration lasted throughout the whole Winter, one hundred and eighty days. The battle of Cunaxa occurred, as we have seen, in October, and the festivities lasted from October to April.⁴¹ Satraps and governors, grandees and nobles, from all parts of the empire, not a few from a great distance, arrived daily and departed after a sojourn of a few days. Many who formerly favoured the claim of Cyrus may have hastened to the court to assert their loyalty to the victorious king. Plutarch states: 'There were turbulent and factious men who represented that the affairs of Persia required a king of such a magnificent spirit, so able a warrior, and so generous a master as Cyrus was; and that the dignity of so great an empire could not be supported without a prince of high thoughts and noble ambition.'⁴² All these guests had to be magnificently entertained. Besides these officials and nobles, the king feasted 'the army of Persia and Media' (חיל פרס ומדי),⁴³ that is to say, those loyal warriors who came to his assistance against his brother. It must have been a very large army, though the number nine hundred thousand, given by Xenophon,⁴⁴ and four hundred thousand, as stated by Ctesias⁴⁵ and Diodorus, is evidently exaggerated. After these festivities were over, Artaxerxes gave a special feast of seven days to the inhabi-

⁴⁰ Paton, p. 73, and numerous other exegetes, regard the gathering of nobles from all provinces for a feast of hundred and eighty days as intrinsically improbable.

⁴¹ According to Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*, VIII, 2. 6), Susa was the winter residence of the Persian kings.

⁴² *Artaxerxes*, VI, 1-2.

⁴³ Siegfried, Wildeboer, Paton, &c. believe that we have to read ושרי חיל פרס ומדי.

⁴⁴ *Anabasis*, I, 7. 11-12.

⁴⁵ *Pers.* 41; Diod. XIV, 5.

tants of the capital, that is to say, each day of the week a different part of the population was invited. It may have been the farewell feast before the king's departure from Susa, or the New Year festival in the month of Nisan. On the seventh day, when not in a sober condition, the king ordered the eunuchs to bring to the banquet his queen Vashti 'to show to the people and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on. But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the eunuchs'.

Esther
1. 10-12.

For the interpretation of this incident we again refer to Plutarch who tells us: 'Artaxerxes married a beautiful and virtuous lady, by order of his parents, and he kept her when they wanted him to put her away. For the king having put her brother to death, designed that she should share his fate. But Artaxerxes applied to his mother with many tears and entreaties, and, with much difficulty, prevailed upon her not only to spare her life, but to excuse him from divorcing her.'⁴⁶ Plutarch's source for this story is Ctesias who gives a more detailed account of this event in telling us that the whole family of Hydarnes, the father of Artaxerxes' wife, were put to death with the exception of the latter, on account of Teriteuchmes the son of Hydarnes, who had been found guilty of the crimes of adultery, incest, and murder.⁴⁷ We must bear in mind, that by opposing the will of his parents, Artaxerxes might have easily forfeited his right to the throne, to which his claim, as we have seen, was questionable. It was very dangerous for Parysatis to let a woman whose whole family she had destroyed, have the power of a queen, and she indeed exerted all her influence with the king to

⁴⁶ *Artaxerxes*, II, 2-3.

⁴⁷ *Pers.* 29.

deprive him of the succession. But Artaxerxes cared more for his wife than for the throne.

Plutarch tells us further that this wife of Artaxerxes was a great favourite with the people: 'What afforded the Persians the most pleasing spectacle was the queen riding in her chariot with the curtains open, and admitting the women of the country to approach and salute her. These things made his administration popular.'⁴⁸ This queen and her mother-in-law detested each other, and quarrelled continually. When Cyrus rebelled, the queen openly upbraided her mother-in-law for her intercession by which she had saved Cyrus's life, and accused her of favouring the claim of the latter.⁴⁹ When Parysatis executed in a most cruel way the faithful servants of the king who had killed Cyrus, the queen complained of her injustice and cruelty.⁵⁰ 'These expostulations fixed in the heart of Parysatis, who was naturally vindictive and barbarous in her resentment and revenge, such a hatred of the queen that she contrived to take her off. Deinon writes, that this cruel purpose was put into execution during the war; but Ctesias assures us, it was after it. And it is not probable that he, who was an eye-witness to the transactions of that court, could either be ignorant of the time when the assassination took place, or could have any reason to misrepresent the date of it; though he often deviates into fictitious tales, and loves to give us invention instead of truth.'⁵¹ 'It was only from the hatred and jealousy which Parysatis had entertained of the queen from the first, that she embarked in so cruel a design. She saw that her own power with the king

⁴⁸ *Artaxerxes*, V, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* XVII, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* VI, 6-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* VI, 8-9.

depended only on his reverence for her as mother ; whereas that of the queen was founded in love, and confirmed by the greatest confidence in her fidelity. The point she had to carry was difficult, and she resolved to make one desperate effort.'⁵² Plutarch further states that after Parysatis had managed to poison the queen, Artaxerxes inquired into the affair, and executed her principal attendants who assisted her to carry out this design. But 'as for Parysatis, the king did not reproach her with the crime, nor punish her any further than by sending her to Babylon, which was the place she desired to retire to, declaring that he would never visit that city while she lived.'⁵³ However, 'the king did not long retain his anger, but was reconciled to his mother, and sent for her to court ; because he saw she had understanding and spirit enough to assist in governing the kingdom, and there now remained no further cause of suspicions and uneasiness between them.'⁵⁴

The queen represented in the Book of Esther, her great beauty of which the king was so proud, her great influence with the latter that she presumed upon his love to disobey his behest, cannot be better depicted than by Plutarch's description of the queen of Artaxerxes, the daughter of Hydarnes. Only a woman like the latter would act like Vashti, openly daring to disgrace the king in the presence of the people, presuming upon his love for her to obtain pardon for her disobedience. The queen of Artaxerxes evidently lost her life shortly after Cyrus's rebellion. But Plutarch's description of the method of her assassination is rather fabulous, and the deed itself seems improbable. We can hardly imagine that Parysatis should have dared

⁵² *Ibid.* XIX, 1-2.⁵³ *Ibid.* XIX, 8-10.⁵⁴ *Ibid.* XXIII, 2.

to murder a queen with whom the king was so deeply in love, and that the latter should not have reproached her with this crime, and should have been reconciled to her after a short time. Plutarch himself refuses to accept Ctesias's account that Parysatis plotted against the queen and resolved to carry her off by poison, because at her own request the king promised not to put Clearchus to death, but afterwards, persuaded by the queen, he destroyed all the prisoners, except Menon, and observes: 'But it is a great absurdity in Ctesias to assign so disproportionate a cause. Would Parysatis, for the sake of Clearchus, undertake so horrid and dangerous an enterprise as that of poisoning the king's lawful wife, by whom he had children and an heir to his crown?'⁵⁵ Hence, if we should accept Plutarch's account that Parysatis out of hatred of the queen did undertake 'so horrid and dangerous an enterprise', we must assume that the queen's position had undergone some change, before she was murdered; that in the meantime some incident occurred which to a certain degree estranged the king from the queen. Parysatis, seeing that the love of the king for his queen was no longer so strong as before, and being afraid lest the latter should regain her former influence, resolved to murder her. The fact that the king, after a short banishment, recalled her, shows that she had not been wrong in her reasoning.

Plutarch further states, 'None had been admitted to the king of Persia's table but his mother and his wife; the former of which sat above him and the latter below him. Artaxerxes, nevertheless, did that honour to Ostanes and Oxartes, two of his younger brothers.'⁵⁶ This statement shows that it must have been a very rare privilege to dine

⁵⁵ *Artaxerxes*, XVIII, 4-6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* V, 5.

with the queen.⁵⁷ A special feature of his character was his great vanity, claiming credit for actions which he never did and for qualities which he did not possess. He was desirous of having the world believe that Cyrus was killed by himself.⁵⁸ When Mithridates, the real slayer of Cyrus, to whom Artaxerxes owed his life and throne, in an unguarded moment, under the influence of wine, boasted of his deed, he was put to death in a manner that beggars description.⁵⁹ Artaxerxes also put many grandees to death, because 'he thought that they despised him for the ill-success of his campaign.'⁶⁰

For the interpretation of the incident of Vashti, we must call attention also to another point. We have

⁵⁷ Plutarch's statement that none had been admitted to the king of Persia's table but his mother and his wife, is quoted by Paton, p. 150, as proof that it was not Persian custom to seclude the women, in observing: 'Stateira was present at the table of Artaxerxes'. Paton's quotation of Herodotus IX, 110, in support of his contention that Persian queens were present at the royal banquets, is just as incorrect. Amestris was at the birthday feast of Xerxes, but Herodotus clearly implied that the latter did not dine with the people, as it is incredible that Amestris would have dared 'to weary Xerxes by her importunity' in the presence of the people. Even Masistes, his own brother, was not present at his table, as he was afterwards called into his presence. Paton further quotes Herodotus, V, 18, where the Persian ambassadors say to Amyntas, king of Macedonia, that the Persians bring their wives and concubines to the feasts. But it is evident, as G. Rawlinson (*ad locum*) rightly observes, that the Persian ambassadors presumed upon the Greek ignorance of Persian customs, in order to amuse themselves with the foreign women. They had indeed to atone with their lives for their conduct, as Alexander, Amyntas's son, well knew the Persian customs, and divined their intentions. Paton and others overlook what Plutarch says about the Persians that they 'are so extremely jealous of their women, that capital punishment is inflicted, not only on the man who speaks to, or touches one of the king's concubines, but on him who approaches or passes their chariots on the road' (*Artaxerxes*, XXVII, 1).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* XIV, 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* XV, XVI.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* XXV, 3.

already mentioned that under the reign of Artaxerxes II the baleful influence of the harem made appalling progress. The rule of the harem was indeed the main curse of the Persian empire. The king was a mere tool in the hands of his favourite wives. The most meritorious grandees fell victims to their intrigues. No Persian could regard himself for one moment secure, if one of the favourite wives or her family bore him ill will. Such a man, his life being in danger, was easily persuaded to conspire against the king or join an insurrection. The patriotic statesmen must have perceived that such a condition was disastrous to the existence of the empire, and were desirous of eliminating the influence of the women. We may also reasonably suppose that the feminine influence at the court set a bad example to all Persian families.⁶¹ These statesmen were wrong in believing in a remedy for an incurable evil. A man of weak character, be he king or beggar, will always yield to his wife's influence, for good or evil.

We return now to the incident of Vashti: The king, as we have seen, was deeply in love with the queen, and exceedingly proud of her beauty. Having been under the influence of wine—and from Cyrus's letter to the Lacedae-

⁶¹ Paton, p. 162, observes: 'The absurdity of the solemn edict commanding the wives to obey their husbands struck even the doctors of the Talmud'. The latter might have been right, if they had ridiculed the idea of making the husbands masters in their own houses by a royal edict. But in remarking that 'even the weaver is master in his own house', they were decidedly wrong. However, Paton and the rabbis overlooked the fact that the royal edict does not say anything about the obedience of the wives to their husbands, but merely contains the fundamental principle, 'that every man should bear rule in his own house', which of course gives the husband power also over his wife. Such a general principle is by no means ridiculous, since it formed one of the fundamental Roman laws, as set forth in the Twelve Tables, according to which the life and liberty of children were in the father's hands.

monians we learn that Artaxerxes II did not possess the Persian 'virtue' of being able to consume great quantities of wine without becoming intoxicated—the king commanded the queen to come and partake of the feast, that the guests might admire her beauty. The queen, however, being 'a virtuous lady', as Plutarch expresses himself, and well aware that that request was not in accordance with the Persian customs, properly inferred that the king in his right senses would never have made such a request, and rightly refused to show herself in the presence of an intoxicated crowd. Artaxerxes, exceedingly vain, and ashamed to admit that he was under the influence of his wife, 'was very wroth and his anger burned in him'. The thought might have occurred to him, having no authority in his own palace, how could he expect the people to obey his commands? The queen's disobedience could not pass with impunity.

'Then the king said to the wise men which knew the times . . . and the next unto him . . . , the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face and which sat the first in the kingdom: "What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the eunuchs?"' The royal councillors to whom this question was addressed were well acquainted with the weak spots in the king's character and with his love for the queen. This question put them in a most embarrassing situation. Considering the queen's disobedience from a purely moral point of view, they could not but admit that under the circumstances her conduct was justifiable. Yet to defend her action would have been nothing short of high treason. The authority of the king was indeed at stake, if the queen

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should be acquitted. It was the latter's duty to comply with the king's behest, even if it was not in accordance with the Persian customs. Besides, if we may believe Herodotus, the Persian kings were not bound by customs, as there was an ancient law decreeing that the king of Persia might do whatever he pleased.⁶² Moreover, it was not for the councillors to decide the guilt of the queen. The question put before them was merely concerning the punishment that should be meted out to her. This was a very difficult problem. They did not want to condemn her to death, lest after a short time the king's yearning for his lost queen might return, and they would have to atone with their lives for their judgement.⁶³ They feared the same fate, if they should propose her divorce, as nothing would prevent the king from marrying her again, if he still loved her, and the queen, after regaining her power, in her resentment against them, might easily bring about their destruction. If they should condemn her to the loss of the rank of a queen, it was probable that she would soon regain her former influence with the king, without the royal rank, and again would not fail to avenge herself upon them. Yet the latter course was the lesser evil and the only way out of this dilemma. Therefore, the councillors condemned her to the punishment of degradation for her conduct. But this queen, as we have seen, was a great favourite with the people. It was not enough to hold up the authority of the king, but also to demonstrate the justice of her punishment. Artaxerxes' administration

⁶² Herodotus III, 31.

⁶³ The Targumim indeed say that after sleeping off his wine-debauch and having grown sober, Ahasuerus executed the councillors who advised him to put Vashti to death.

was very popular, as we have seen, and they did not wish that by their advice the king should lose his popularity. Besides, no king at the beginning of his reign likes to gain the reputation of a tyrant. Hence, the councillors represented the queen's offence as a danger to the well-being of the empire, saying: 'Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, the king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.' The councillors, therefore, advised the king to promulgate the degradation of the queen by a decree, in proposing: 'If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that because Vashti came not before the king Ahasuerus, the king shall give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.' Such a decree would have the effect of making the lives of the Persians more secure at the court and more peaceful at home.⁶⁴ The

⁶⁴ The clause **וּמִדְבַּר כָּל־שָׂוֶה עִמּוֹ** is generally regarded as corrupt. The rendering of the English version: 'and that it should be published according to the language of every people', is of course quite impossible. We have already mentioned that the Greek version omitted this clause (see Chapter I, n. 8). Bertheau-Ryssel, Wildeboer, Siegfried and others emend it, with Hitzig, to **כָּל שֶׁוֹהֶה עִמּוֹ** ('what suits him'). These commentators could have saved themselves the trouble of emending this corrupt clause, if they had seen how such a corruption might have occurred. We may assume

councillors of course could not mention the deplorable state of harem-rule at the court, but only the latter's effect : 'And when the king's decree, which he shall make, shall be published throughout all his empire, for it is great, all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small'. This affair undoubtedly caused an estrangement and a bitter feeling between the king and Vashti. The former could not get out of his mind the humiliation he suffered in the presence of his subjects, and the latter was indignant at the injustice of her degradation. Parysatis, taking advantage of this state of affairs, resolved

that there were manuscripts in which the *'ammūdīm* ran in the following lines :

וישלח ספרים אל כל מדינות המלך
אל מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ואל עם ועם כלשונו
להיות כל איש שורר בביתו
אחר הדברים האלה כשוך חמת המלך.

We may further assume that some scribe misspelt the words *ועם כלשונו* or made a blot on them, and not having had the proper means handy to erase them, wrote the same words again underneath in the following line, after the words *להיות כל איש שורר בביתו*, as between the first and second chapters there was in all probability a free space. Subsequently, some copyist read *ועם כלשונו* and understood the passage to mean : 'That every man should bear rule in his own house, and every people according to its own language'. But as the passage in this construction did not seem to give a proper sense, he may have changed the words *ועם כלשונו* into *כלשון עמו*, and by way of interpretation, added the marginal gloss *ומדבר*. Haupt (Critical Notes, p. 131), considers the whole clause a late gloss, since in Talmud Babli Megillah 12 b the passage 1. 22 is discussed, but there is no reference to this clause. But this fact is no proof at all that the rabbis did not know this passage. They did not discuss it, because it seemed to them incomprehensible. We cannot expect them to suggest that this clause was a gloss or corruption. Moreover, a suggestion that a gloss was added in post-talmudic times, when the Book of Esther had been already for hundreds of years one of the most esteemed canonical books, deserves no consideration whatever. Finally, a gloss is supposed to have some sense, and this clause has none at all.

to put her out of the way, lest the king might be reconciled to his wife and she regain her former power.⁶⁵

We are well aware of the fact that our interpretation is not in accordance with the text under discussion, which reads: **אשר לא תבוא ושתי לפני המלך אחשורוש ומלכותה יתן המלך** (‘that Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus, and the king shall give her royal estate unto another that is better than she’). Accordingly, the text distinctly states that Vashti was actually divorced and not merely degraded from the rank of a queen. However, by a critical analysis of this passage we can demonstrate that the text here must be slightly corrupted. If the promulgation of Vashti’s punishment was intended to have a salutary effect upon the conduct of the Persian women for all times, we would expect to find in this edict ‘written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes’, the cause of her punishment. Furthermore, the second part of this passage is quite superfluous, it being a matter of course for the king to choose another queen, if Vashti was divorced, and cannot be a part of the edict; why should such a trivial fact be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes? Nor can it have been the advice of the councillors, as this was unnecessary. The original reading of this passage may have been something like **(על) אשר לא באה ושתי לפני המלך אחשורוש מלכותה יתן המלך** (‘because Vashti came not before the king Ahasuerus, the king shall give her royal estate unto another that is better than she’; but the original reading

⁶⁵ Plutarch’s statement that shortly before the murder of Stateira, the latter and Parysatis had, in appearance, forgotten their old suspicions and animosities, and began to visit and eat at each other’s table, implies that the queen no longer interfered with her mother-in-law (*Artaxerxes*, XIX, 5).

לא תבוא could also mean : 'because she will not come'. In either case, the text, according to our emendation, would contain both cause and effect, and be in agreement with our presentation of that incident. Vashti lost only her rank as queen, but still remained the lawful wife of Artaxerxes.⁶⁶

There is still another point to be discussed. The name of the queen of Artaxerxes II was not Vashti, but Stateira. Plutarch is no doubt right on this point, as Ctesias who lived at the court of Artaxerxes must have known the name of that queen. As far as the other Greek writers are concerned, all of them are more or less dependent upon Ctesias, and they took over the name of this queen from the latter. The name of the queen was indeed Stateira, but having been a famous beauty and a great favourite with the people, she was styled *Vashti*, which, as was recognized long ago,⁶⁷ means in the Persian language 'beauty'. In the memory of the people, her proper name was displaced by this epithet. We have a classic example of such a phenomenon in the name of the famous Greek woman who lived in Egypt under the reign of king Amasis. Her real name was *Doricha*, yet Herodotus and other classic writers call her by her epithet *Rhōdōpis*, 'the rosy-cheeked', though they knew that Sappho mentioned her by her real name.⁶⁸ Our author may likewise have known that the queen's real name was Stateira, and nevertheless preferred to call her by the widely-known epithet Vashti.

⁶⁶ Renan, in his *History of the People of Israel*, VIII, 15, note, is the only historian who conjectured that 'possibly there is some reminiscence of Stateira and Parysatis'.

⁶⁷ Cf. Richardson's *Ueber morgenländische Völker*, 1779, p. 166; Cassel, *l. c.*, p. 27, and Justi, *Iran. Namenb.*, under 'Wasti'.

⁶⁸ Herodotus II, 134-5, and cf. G. Rawlinson, n. 2, *ad locum*.

However, the possibility that *Vashti* is a hypocoristicon of a compounded name *Sta-teira* = *Asta-teira* = *Washta-teira*, which may mean 'the beauty of the god Mercury', ought also to be considered.⁶⁹

We have already observed that Plutarch is silent as to the immediate successor of the assassinated queen. Ctesias may have known nothing about it, as he left the court about 398 B.C.E.⁷⁰ But the former states a fact that

⁶⁹ The name *Stateira* is, according to Justi, *Iran. Namenb.*, compounded of the two elements *sta* and *teira*. The latter element is evidently identical with *tēr* in the Persian personal names *Teribazus*, *Teridates*, *Teriteuchmes*, &c., which is generally taken by Justi and others to be the Persian name of the planet Mercury (as god, the scribe of Ahuramazda, and identical with *Nabū*). The same divine element we may see in the names *Aghrimat-teira*, *Baeshat-teira*, and *Pairish-teira*. Doubtful, however, is the meaning of the first element *sta*. The latter occurs also in two other Persian names *Σταμένης* and *Σταβάκης*, the meaning of which is, according to Justi, doubtful. We suggest that the name *Sta-teira* corresponds to the Persian name *Vashta-teira*. The name *Vashti* is rendered in the Greek version into 'Αστιν and 'Αστι, in which the first radical is represented by a vowel. The same rendering is found also in other Persian names, as *Vidarna* = 'Ιδέρνης, *Vindafarna* = 'Ινταφέρνης, *Vahuk* = 'Ωχος, *Vashtak* = 'Αστάκτος, *Vaumisa* = 'Ωμισος, &c. Lucian's rendering of *Vashti* into Ουάστιν and that of Josephus into Ουάστη are due to the Hebrew pronunciation of this Persian name. Now the element *asta* is actually found in several Persian names, as in 'Αστιβάσας, 'Αστιάσσης (Aeschylus, *Persae* 22), and 'Αστης. The same element we may see in the name Ουάστροβαλος. We further find that a vowel at the beginning of a name was regarded as prothetic; so we find side by side the names 'Ασπαμίτης and Σπαμίτης, 'Τσασίνης and Σπασίνης, *Afrudsha* and *Frudsha*, *Amirchvand* and *Mirchvand*, *Vardan* = 'Ροδάνης and 'Ορδάνης. Considering all these points, we may well assume that the Persian name *Vashta-teira* was rendered by the Greeks into *Asta-teira*, and by treating the first vowel as prothetic, was also pronounced *Sta-teira*. The Babylonians, however, shortened this compounded name by omitting the second element and by attaching to the shortened name the Babylonian hypocoristic termination *i*.

⁷⁰ His departure from the court may have had some connexion with the banishment of Parysatis, who was a friend of Clearchus whom Ctesias so greatly admired (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, XVIII). The latter may have been her protégé.

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somewhat seems to corroborate the incident of the second chapter of Esther: 'Artaxerxes had three hundred and sixty concubines, all women of the greatest beauty'.⁷¹ This reminds us of the gathering of the virgins for the selection of a successor of Vashti. Now, it is true, Diodorus Siculus tells us exactly the same about Darius III.⁷² And all Persian kings had a large number of concubines. But the current interpretation of the incident of the second chapter is erroneous. The royal harem could not have been maintained without having taken into it, either by force or with the consent of their relatives, the daughters of the subjects. From time to time such a harem had to be replenished and rejuvenated by younger women.⁷³ The advice about the gathering of the virgins was not an innovation under the reign of Ahasuerus, as such gatherings were customary in the Persian empire. The author of our story merely intends to inform us that on the occasion of such a gathering Esther became the queen of Ahasuerus. The latter, when his wrath was appeased, 'remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her'. Remembering now that she was unjustly condemned and publicly disgraced, his love for her revived, and he mourned her loss. Among the women of his harem, there was none the equal of his lost wife in beauty and other qualities, who could replace her. Nor was there among the high nobility with whom the royal family was wont to intermarry such a woman to efface in the heart of the king the image of the former queen. Therefore

⁷¹ *Artaxerxes*, XXVII, 5.

⁷² Diodorus XVII, 8.

⁷³ See n. 12. Diodorus indeed alludes to such gatherings in saying that these three hundred and sixty women were the greatest beauties that could be found throughout Asia.

the courtiers advised the king that such a customary gathering of virgins should be held now—though the need of the harem may not have required it, or it may not have been the usual period for such a gathering—and among those gathered might be found one woman who would be in every respect equal to Vashti. It was by no means necessary that such a woman should succeed the latter as queen. But from the king's weak character it was a foregone conclusion that the latter would bestow on her the highest rank, if she succeeded in completely obliterating in his heart the memory of his former wife. The courtiers in saying: 'Let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti', may have alluded to the agreement of Darius I with the other conspirators, that the Persian kings should not marry outside of their own families, and advised the king to disregard this agreement, which under present circumstances became invalid; since of these noble families there was none worthy of taking the place of Vashti.

Of further interest for the character of Artaxerxes II is Plutarch's account of his return from the campaign against the Cadusians: 'He found on his arrival at his capital that he had lost many brave men, and almost all his horses; and imagining that he was despised for his losses and the ill-success of the expedition, he became suspicious of his grandees. *Many of them he put to death in anger, and more out of fear.*'⁷⁴ Though the expedition against the Cadusians took place in a later period of his reign, and therefore these executions have no connexion with our story, nevertheless this conduct sheds light upon this king's character. A king who puts to death many

⁷⁴ *Artaxerxes*, XXV, 5.

grandees in anger, and more out of fear, was quite capable of executing his prime minister Haman, his sons and partizans, for the same reason. No less characteristic of this king is his treatment of Tissaphernes. The latter had saved his life at Pasargadae and watched all the movements of Cyrus, informing the king of his designs, as already mentioned. Plutarch calls him 'the most implacable enemy of the Greeks',⁷⁵ and thus, from a Persian point of view, he must have been the most ardent patriot. His final reward was to be executed upon charges preferred against him by his greatest enemies, the Greeks and Parysatis.⁷⁶

In support of our contention that Ahasuerus of Esther is identical with Artaxerxes II, we may call attention to the following fact. The French Archaeologist Dieulafoy describes the ruins of Susa, and demonstrates that the description of the palace of Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther is absolutely correct.⁷⁷ But the palace to which this scholar refers is not that of Xerxes but that of Artaxerxes II. The palace in which Xerxes and his successors resided had been destroyed by a fire and was rebuilt by Artaxerxes II, as the latter in his inscription informs us.⁷⁸ Who knows whether the palace of Xerxes, dating from an early period, was not in many points different from that given in our story?⁷⁹

We may mention also a remarkable statement of Bar Hebraeus in his *Chronicles*: 'This Artaxerxes (II) the

⁷⁵ *Artaxerxes*, XXIII, 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁷ M. Dieulafoy, *L'Acropole de la Susa*, 1890.

⁷⁸ *Die altpersischen Keilinschriften*, p. 45.

⁷⁹ Paton, p. 65, also observes: 'The palace of Xerxes, as described in Esther, is not unlike the palace of Artaxerxes Mnemon, as excavated by Dieulafoy at Susa.'

Hebrews call Ahasuerus; and therefore Johanan was of the opinion that the story of Esther occurred in his days' (חנניה הנביא וזמנו של אחשורוש) (אחשורוש: מלך) (חנניה הנביא וזמנו של אחשורוש).⁸⁰ This plain statement that Artaxerxes II was by the Hebrews called Ahasuerus must rest upon some tradition still preserved in the days of Bar-Hebraeus (*c.* 1250 C.E.). On the basis of this tradition, and for no other reason, Johanan suggested that the story of Esther occurred under the reign of Artaxerxes II, seeing in this story a similar phenomenon that the Ahasuerus of the Hebrew text is in the Greek version called Artaxerxes.

Having now sufficiently demonstrated that the king described in the Book of Esther was Artaxerxes II, we have to explain why the Hebrew text should contain a fictitious name. The solution of this problem may be found by a comparison of the political careers of the two Persian kings Xerxes I and Artaxerxes II, and by taking into account historical events in a later period of the Persian empire.

No nation cherishes the memory of a ruler by whom it was humiliated. The memory of Xerxes was no doubt detested by the Persians in a later period, after the passing of the Achaemenian dynasty, when they looked back at their glorious past, and could freely express their opinions about the happenings of those times. After four years of preparations, with enormous forces at his command, Xerxes was disgracefully defeated several times by the comparatively small army of the Greeks, and in consequence of these defeats, lost the Greek cities of Asia Minor, Thrace, and Cyprus. By these misfortunes Xerxes put

⁸⁰ *The Chronicles of Bar-Hebraeus*, p. 32.

upon the haughty Persians the stigma of cowardice. The later Persians could vindicate the honour of their ancestors only by laying the blame for these defeats on Xerxes, contending that they were not due to any lack of courage in the Persian armies, but to the misfortune of having been under the command of an incapable ruler. The disparaging description of Xerxes's personality by late classical writers may have had its source of information in the Orient. No Persian would have objected if Xerxes was represented as a weak character.

The condition of the Persian empire, as far as its foreign relations were concerned, exhibited under the reign of Artaxerxes II a sharp contrast to that under Xerxes. The memory of the former, who humiliated the hereditary enemies of the Persian empire and vindicated its honour, could not but be sacred to every Persian. The legend mentioned above, that in honour of Artaxerxes II, the Persians decreed that all his successors should bear the name Artaxerxes, must have its origin in the Orient in a period when the Persian history of the Achaemenian empire was no longer well known. The names Arses and Darius III, who succeeded Artaxerxes III, were sunk in oblivion. But Artaxerxes II was a name never to be forgotten.

The Persian empire overthrown by Alexander the Great was, after an interruption of about eighty years, resurrected in the year 248 B.C.E., though under another name, Parthia. The founders of the Parthian empire, Arsaces and Tiridates, and their successors traced their lineage to Artaxerxes II, and based upon it their claim as rightful heirs to the empire of the Achaemenians,⁸¹

⁸¹ See Justi, *Iran. Namenb.*, p. 28. Ed. Meyer (*Encycl. Brit.*, under Arsaces') says: 'A later tradition, preserved by Arrian, derives Arsaces

though this claim may have no real foundation. The representation of the alleged famous ancestor of the Parthian kings as a weak character, and the recital about him of uncomplimentary details in the Jewish sacred writings, was not without danger for the Jews in the East, and may indeed have been the cause of persecutions. We must bear in mind that the Parthian empire was established in the Alexandrian age, when the Jewish writings were being rendered into Greek. The Parthians were somewhat imbued with Greek culture. The Arsacids even founded Greek cities. When Arsaces Mithridates conquered Babylon, he assumed the epithet Philhellene.⁸² The hostile attitude of the Greeks towards the Jews in the second century B.C.E. was no doubt just as intense in the East under the Arsacids as in the West under the Seleucids. The presumption that Greeks actually accused the Jews of slandering publicly and annually the memory of the famous ancestor of the Parthian kings, whose name ought to be sacred to everybody, is very likely. Therefore the Jews were compelled to choose between two alternatives: either to suppress the Book of Esther altogether and at the same time abolish the festival of Purim, or to change it in such a way that it might not be offensive to the national feeling of the inhabitants of the Parthian empire. They naturally preferred the latter course, and substituted

and Tiridates from the Achaemenean king Artaxerxes II. But this has evidently no historical foundation'. This historian is no doubt right, if he means that this tradition is without historical foundation. But there can be scarcely any doubt that the Arsacids did claim to be the lineal descendants of Artaxerxes II. Arrian certainly did not invent this tradition. It would have been without historical analogy, if they had not claimed to be the descendants of an ancient royal family.

⁸² See Ed. Meyer (*ibid.*) and Justi, *Geschichte*, p. 148.

in the Book of Esther, for the name of Artaxerxes, the name of Ahasuerus (= Xerxes), which could be used with impunity.

The substitution of the name Ahasuerus was quite natural. Besides, the Jews had no other choice among the names of Achaemenian kings. Those of Cyrus and Darius could not be considered for this purpose, as they were sacred to the Jews, and even more so than to the Persians. The names of Cambyses and Arses were out of the question, as these kings did not rule twelve years. Nevertheless, the name they substituted is remarkable, as there is reason to assume that the proper name of Artaxerxes II was Ahasuerus. If this is true, it is either a coincidence, or the Jewish leaders in the East, in the second century B.C.E., must have known more about Persian history than we are willing to give them credit for. The name Artaxerxes was not a proper name, but a title, and means 'he whose empire is well fitted, or perfected',⁸³ which was assumed by the kings Artaxerxes I, II, III, on their accession to the throne. From an astronomical cuneiform tablet dated 'in the twenty-sixth year of *Arshu*, who is Artaxerxes' (*Arshu sha Artakshatsu*)⁸⁴ we learn that the proper name of Artaxerxes II was *Arshu*. This evidently confirms Deinon's statement that his name was Oarses. Plutarch, however, does not accept this statement, and observes: 'Artaxerxes at first was named Arsicas (or Arsaces), though Deinon asserts that his original name was Oarses. But though Ctesias has filled his books with a number of incredible and extravagant fables, it is not probable that

⁸³ See Ed. Meyer, *Encycl. Brit.*, under 'Artaxerxes', and Justi, *Iran. Namenb.*

⁸⁴ Strassmeier, in *Zeitschrift f. Assyriologie*, VII, p. 148.

he should be ignorant of the name of a king at whose court he lived, in quality of physician to him, his wife, his mother, and his children'.⁸⁵ But Plutarch did not know that both names, Oarses and Arsaces, are identical. The name *Arshu* = Arsēs = Oarsēs = 'man.' The suffix *ke(ka)* is a Persian hypocoristic termination.⁸⁶ Thus Arsaces (Arsicas) is a hypocoristicon of *Arshu*. But hypocoristic terminations, as a rule, are affixed only to shortened names.⁸⁷ What may have been the original compounded name of Artaxerxes? The name Xerxes = Persian *Khsha-yārsha* = Babylonian *Khi-sha-ar-shu* means 'a mighty man, warrior, hero'. It was not a title, like Artaxerxes, but a proper name. In antiquity, especially among the Aryans, a proper name was the expression of the bearer's personality.⁸⁸ The bearer of a name 'Mighty man' had to live up to its meaning, and could not be a coward. Both Darius I and Artaxerxes I gave the name *Khsha-yārsha* to the legitimate heirs of the throne. Darius II, though he had not yet been king at the birth of his eldest son, may have nevertheless imitated their example and named his first-born son *Khshayārsha*. But the first royal bearer of this name was murdered. When the same fate happened to the second royal bearer of this name, it may have become ominous. Besides, this name may have become unpleasant to the ears of Darius II, who occupied the place of his murdered brother, Xerxes II. Hence Darius

⁸⁵ *Artaxerxes*, I, 4.

⁸⁶ Justi, *Iran. Namenb.*, Einleitung.

⁸⁷ See *ibid.* It is quite possible that in a later period the name Arsaces was treated like a regular name and lost its hypocoristic signification. But the fact that Artaxerxes is called *Arshu* in the Babylonian document leaves no doubt that Arsaces was a hypocoristic formation.

⁸⁸ Cf. H. Ranke, *Die Personennamen i. d. Urkund. d. Hammurabi-dynastie*, 1902, p. 2.

may have shortened his son's name *Khshayārsha* to *Ārsha* and affixed to it the hypocoristic termination *ke(ka)*. But in official documents this name was written without the hypocoristic suffix.⁸⁹ The Jews who had many eunuchs at the Persian court, of whom some appeared to have been leaders in Israel, may have been better informed of these details than the Greek classical writers. These court stories may have been handed down, so that the original name of Artaxerxes II was still known in the second century B.C.E. and even later.

Outside of the Parthian empire, in Syria and Palestine, the original name Artaxerxes has been preserved in the Book of Esther. The rabbis, who fixed the Canon, aimed of course at uniformity of the Scriptures. But the Jews in the East could not accept the name Artaxerxes.—And there can be no doubt that the fixing of the Canon was done with the co-operation and approval of the Eastern rabbis, though we have no information whatever how this work was done.—Therefore the Western rabbis had no other choice but to accept the reading, Ahasuerus. Hence the Greek version which undoubtedly ante-dates the fixing of the Canon,⁹⁰ has the original name Artaxerxes. But the Lucianic recension made towards the end of the third century C.E. preferred the reading of the Hebrew text and rendered it *Ἀσούηρος*. Josephus follows as usual the

⁸⁹ We might even suggest that the title Arsaces of the Parthian rulers was not assumed in honour of the founder of this empire, but to assert their descent from Artaxerxes whose proper name was Arsaces. It is even possible that the very name of the founder of the Parthian empire was assumed in honour of his alleged ancestor. The former ruled only two years, and his dominion was insignificant, as it was limited to his native land Parthia.

⁹⁰ Cf. Chapter I, n. 9.

Greek Version and has the correct name Artaxerxes, but identified this king with Artaxerxes Longimanus.⁹¹

⁹¹ Josephus may or may not have known that the name Ahasuerus in the Hebrew text was due to 'the correction of the Scribes' (תקון סופרים). But this question is quite irrelevant, as his chronology of the Persian period is not to be relied upon. In presenting Ezra as a contemporary of Xerxes Josephus follows neither the Hebrew nor the Greek text. This error is no doubt due to his wrong identification of the king of Esther with Artaxerxes Longimanus. The latter, according to Ezra 7, was very favourably inclined towards the Jews in the seventh year of his reign. Therefore it seemed to Josephus incredible that the same king should have decreed five years later their destruction, and he concluded that the king of Ezra was Xerxes.

(To be continued.)